

THE DIRECTOR OF  
CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

National Intelligence Council

8 May 1984

NOTE FOR THE DIRECTOR

The attached is from Harry Cochran.  
I have forwarded copies to C/NIC, NIO/USSR  
and NIO/EA.

Herbert E. Meyer  
VC/NIC

Attachment

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9 May 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: Vice Chairman, NIC

FROM : Special Assistant for Warning

SUBJECT : China's Intentions Toward Vietnam: A Warning Hypothesis

1. Beijing's motives in deploying main force units of four or five armies near the Vietnamese border and intensifying military pressures go well beyond mere retaliation for Vietnamese military actions along the Thai-Kampuchean border this spring. The Chinese intend to bring a number of Sino-Vietnamese political and territorial issues to a head and to coerce Hanoi into granting concessions that will demonstrate China's regional preponderance.

2. Chinese artillery attacks and shallow ground incursions into Vietnamese territory since early April are aimed at provoking Hanoi to escalate the fighting along the land border and in the Gulf of Tonkin. China will then seize upon this escalation as the pretext for heavier ground attacks to occupy long-claimed territories in the border area, seize one or more of the nine Spratly Islands garrisoned by Vietnamese forces, and compel Hanoi to renounce its November 1982 claim to all Tonkin Gulf waters west of the 108th meridian. The Chinese probably will also attempt to use their greater military leverage to extract concessions on Vietnam's role in Kampuchea, including renewed demands for Hanoi's acceptance of the five-point plan for resolving the Kampuchean issue that the Chinese proposed in the first round of Sino-Soviet talks in October 1982.

3. The Chinese leaders' decision to force a showdown with the Vietnamese rests on their judgment that the state of play in the China-USSR-US strategic triangle has created favorable conditions for long-deferred moves to settle accounts with Hanoi. They are confident that their dialogue with Moscow and the

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consolidation of their relations with the US achieved during President Reagan's visit to China have placed them in the pivotal position in the triangle--a role the US occupied in the early 1970's because it was the only player in the triangle that had good relations with the other two players. The Chinese believe the Reagan Administration's assertive policy toward the Soviet Union has resulted in a major change in triangular relationships in which the US now needs close ties with China more than China needs good relations with Washington. In Beijing's view, this altered equation will prompt the US to lend at least tacit support to Chinese moves against Vietnam. As for the Soviet side of the triangle, the Chinese are confident that Moscow's moves during the past two years toward a normalization of Sino-Soviet relations will give the Soviets strong incentives to prevent a Sino-Vietnamese showdown from jeopardizing the advantages that have accrued from better relations with China.

4. Chinese calculations are anchored to the assumption that they will have a relatively free hand to bring the Vietnamese to heel by virtue of Moscow's concern to avoid reactions likely to move China into closer strategic cooperation with the US. The Chinese leaders recognize that a showdown with Hanoi will freeze the dialogue with Moscow for a year or so, but this prospect does not trouble them. In fact, they have some scores to settle with the Soviets over the latter's cool treatment of Vice Premier Wan Li during his visit to Moscow for Andropov's funeral. The Chinese were angered by Premier Tikhonov's failure to receive Wan Li. Wan demonstrated his displeasure by ignoring Ambassador Shcherbakov at Beijing airport upon Wan's return from Moscow. The outcome of the latest round of the Sino-Soviet talks in March confirmed Beijing's judgment that no progress on sensitive political-military issues could be expected in the foreseeable future. Deng Xiaoping told American visitors on 22 February that the Soviets were likely to remain "rigid" and

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incapable of new initiatives under the "transitional" leadership of General Secretary Chernenko. On the same day, Deng publicly renewed his insistence that the Soviets remove the three main obstacles to normalization.

5. The Chinese are gambling that limited ground incursions into Vietnam to occupy disputed territory, capture of one or more of Vietnam's Spratly Islands, and an enforced Vietnamese retreat from the 48,000 square nautical mile expansion of "internal waters" in the Gulf in November 1982 will deal a humiliating blow to the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance, expose the strategic hollowness of the Soviet base at Cam Ranh Bay, and dramatize China's preponderant position in the South China Sea.

6. If China does, in fact, proceed with this scenario, the Soviets will be caught in a very awkward crossfire between their clients in Hanoi and their partners-in-dialogue in Beijing. The postponement of First Deputy Premier Arkhipov's visit to China demonstrates the Soviets' recognition that they have been outmaneuvered by the Chinese and that they face no-win situations in their relations with both Hanoi and Beijing. This awareness of having been sand-bagged by the wily Chinese was reflected in the feeble TASS statement on 4 May which characterized China's "armed provocations" against Vietnam as the "largest in scope since the time of the aggression against the SRV in February 1979." The statement candidly acknowledged that China's aim is to compel Vietnam "and other countries of Indochina" to change their foreign policy course. TASS condemned China's military provocations, but it avoided any hint of Soviet countermeasures against China and meekly declared that, "It would be extremely myopic to think that in 1984 the results and consequences of aggression against Vietnam will be any different than those in 1979." Translated, TASS was informing the Vietnamese, "You're on your own, comrades. Don't count on us to pull your chestnuts from the fire."

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